



Member Services Marketing Committee (MSMC)

Focus Group Initiative Executive Report - Retail

A series of Focus Group Initiatives are planned by the Member Services Marketing Committee to pursue the mandate of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Strategic Plan to learn and understand the needs of our members and to develop ways to serve them better.

Focus Groups will concentrate on various sectors of industry and the results will be published and available on the chamber website at www.aurorachamber.on.ca. Currently, sessions accommodate approximately 8 - 10 participants and invitations to participate in specific sector sessions will be promoted through email, telephone and on the website.

An independent facilitator oversees each session so that information and discussion can be expressed freely. Comments are recorded, presented to the Committee for analysis. Participants are not published and are kept strictly confidential.

From these results, the Chamber will be able to understand the needs of our chamber members, find out what members value most in the chamber and to tailor upcoming programs and events to help move business forward.

Retail Focus Group Results

The first Focus Group concentrated on the retail Sector and was held on February 22 and 23. Participants were invited through telephone, email and letters. Marion Howell of the Iris Group facilitated three focus group sessions with a total of seventeen retail members of the Chamber. The first session was actually a one-on-one discussion with a single retailer, each of the second and third sessions were groups of eight.

At each session, discussion was stimulated in four areas through prepared questions. A summary of the issues identified and discussed follows each question.

1) Where do you want your business to be in 3-5 years?

There was a variety of responses here, but the common themes tended to be the desire to grow, to find a way to weather the ups and downs in the economy, to establish sustainable profitability, and to improve service and quality. If the Chamber can develop ways to support these goals over time, it will certainly increase its value to retailers.

2) How is the Chamber already supporting you?

Each of the major Chamber initiatives and services got some "play" in these discussions. Networking and the events that promote it were seen as very valuable. The ability to sponsor events, or have booths at Chamber events were seen as very useful in driving retailer business growth.

Retailers also expressed an interest in "cross-promoting with other members". At least one retailer indicated they joined the Chamber and promote their membership in it to reinforce their "legitimacy" as a quality-oriented business. Good things were also said about the Home Show, the Business Achievement Awards, and the Chamber's communications to its members.



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3) If the Chamber could support you more, what programs and services do you think they could offer?

This area drew the most feedback, as expected. There were several key opportunities identified:

- **Advocacy** By far and away the most prevalent request, most retailers agreed the Chamber should or could help them more by advocating on their behalf with a number of constituencies, primarily the Town of Aurora. The issues included the current seemingly restrictive “signage” by-laws and rules, the rights of commercial tenants to receive proper treatment from landlords, and the development and support of the “Downtown/Yonge Street” area as an attractive and prosperous retail area, with adequate parking etc.
- **Leveraging the power of Chamber members as a group** to put the small business owner in a position to compete with larger organizations was brought forth. This theme was strongly interweaved with the advocacy discussion, but also applied to “group” advertising and promotion programs, “group” discount programs, and more retail group “events”.
- **Providing More Information** and education to members and prospective members about the cost and advantages of doing business in Aurora, what the relationship is between the Chamber and the Town, and who to go to get solutions to business issues. At least one suggested the Chamber have guest speakers at events to present ideas and suggestions for business management and business improvement. (Perhaps an increased number of educational events at times better suited to retailers might help?)
- **Helping Aurora retailers find good local employees** Can the Chamber provide job-posting services at member/group rates? Might the Chamber sponsor a Job Fair”?
- **Other areas** included a possible role for the Chamber in discouraging the proliferation of “transient” or “questionable” businesses, tackling the oncoming Hydro “time-of-use” rate structure, and more “perks” or member-advantage programs.

4) Does a Retailers’ Committee or Forum interest you?

In general, participants felt this would be a very helpful thing to have, and a quarterly interval was suggested. Clearly we have another opportunity here.

Summary

After our first Focus Group, the Member Services Marketing Committee feels that this initiative has been very successful in providing insight and information about what member group’s value about the Chamber. With the approval of the board of directors, the MSMC will proceed with further Focus Group Initiatives. Follow through on the suggested initiatives will take place once we have conducted focus groups with the rest of the key segments of our membership over the next several months.

The next Focus Groups are scheduled for May and will include members of 'Home Based Businesses', divided into three or four subgroups with common interests.

The Member Services Marketing Committee would like to express its sincere thanks to Jim Beechey and Caroline Rusnell for all of the scheduling, inviting and facilities organization for these first sessions, and its deep appreciation to Marion Howell for conducting the sessions.

Andy Hewitson,
Co-Chair, Member Services Marketing Committee